

INTRODUCTION

This section provides an overview of fundamental principles of historic preservation that are embedded within the Historic Preservation Ordinance. It also establishes the connection between the ordinance and the forthcoming design guidelines. Finally, it provides information on why historic structures should be preserved and how their presence benefits a community.



IN THIS SECTION:

Introduction	13
Preservation Principles	14
Why Preserve Historic Structures?	18



WHY DO RESIDENTS VALUE HISTORIC RESOURCES?

“Many of us moved to the district for the history and the sense of community.”

... comment from a neighborhood meeting participant

“I love the eclectic nature of the district, including the people and the architecture.”

... comment from a neighborhood meeting participant

“I love this neighborhood and the history behind it. The home we live in has been in the family for over 80 years ... it is my dream that my grandchildren will someday call this place their home too!”

... comment from a survey participant

Many people love Houston’s historic districts for their unique character and charm and for the cherished quality of life that they support. These historic districts tell stories of Houston’s early years and of those who helped to establish the city, build its economy, and nurture its culture. Property owners who are actively engaged in maintaining their historic homes do so within a framework of preservation principles that are used by the City and that are recognized nationally as best practices.

PRESERVATION PRINCIPLES

The goal of historic preservation is to keep properties and places of historic and cultural value in active use, accommodating appropriate improvements to sustain their viability while maintaining the key character-defining features which contribute to their significance as cultural resources. Preservation also seeks to keep cultural resources intact for the benefit of future generations. It is an integral component of other community initiatives in neighborhood livability, sustainability, economic development, and cultural appreciation.

The term *historic preservation* includes the specific methodologies associated with maintaining the integrity of significant resources, and also covers a range of *character management tools* that serve to maintain traditional features of established neighborhoods.

The Historic Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 33, Article VII) supports a range of tools that serve to maintain the character of historic neighborhoods through the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). The COA is issued by the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC) and the Planning Director to approve proposed alterations, rehabilitations, restoration, or additions to historic structures. Among the conditions for approval is this one:

1. *The proposed activity must preserve the distinguishing qualities or character of the building, structure, object, or site and its environment.*

In order to apply criteria such as this from the ordinance, some basic terms used in historic preservation need to be explained. While these terms have nationally accepted definitions, many are mentioned but not defined in the Historic Preservation Ordinance. These terms apply to individual contributing structures (those that are considered to have historic significance) as well as to each historic district as a whole.

Character-Defining Features

The condition for approval previously referenced mentions the “distinguishing qualities or character” of a property. The character of a historic structure or site refers to the visual aspects and physical features that comprise its appearance. Character-defining features include the overall shape of the structure, its materials, craftsmanship and stylistic exterior features, as well as the various aspects of its site and environment.



Significance

The historic significance of a property refers to the importance for which a property has been evaluated and found to meet national or local criteria. Significance may be related to the property’s association with important people or events, as well as its design and craftsmanship. Proposed physical changes to a historic structure may be approved or denied based on the impact to a structure’s historic significance.

Integrity

A building or site which has “Integrity” has retained sufficient aspects of its location, design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling or association to convey its historic significance. A majority of the building’s structural system, materials, and its character-defining features should remain intact. Maintaining the integrity of each historic structure is a fundamental principle of historic preservation.

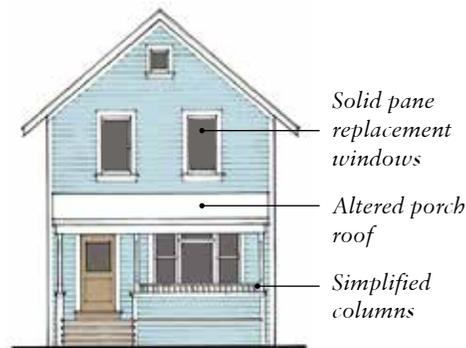
Building Integrity

Original design



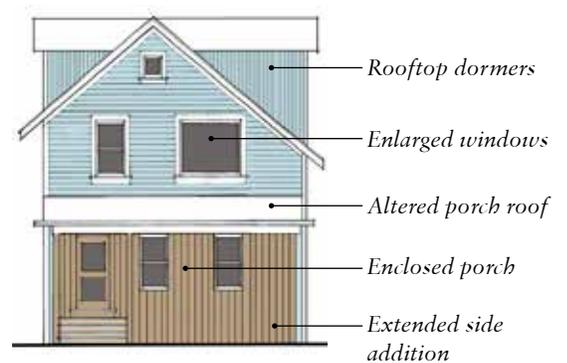
*“Contributing” Structure
This building retains its integrity.*

Partially altered



*“Contributing” Structure
with some alterations
This building remains contributing with opportunity for restoration.*

Substantially altered



*“Noncontributing” Structure
with major alterations. This building does not retain its integrity.*

These diagrams illustrate the concept of preserving integrity, and how changes may affect historic significance.



Treatments

What is an appropriate approach for work on a historic structure? Four *treatments* are recognized nationally: preservation, restoration, reconstruction and rehabilitation.

Preservation

Preservation is used broadly to mean keeping the integrity of a historic structure intact, but it also has a more specific, technical meaning. Preservation refers to maintaining the existing form, integrity, and material of a structure by keeping key features in good repair.

Restoration

The *restoration* of a historic structure is the process of accurately re-creating the form, features, and character of a property as it appeared at a particular point in time. Essentially, this means putting things back to the way they were.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction is the process of accurately replicating a structure's appearance at a specific time by rebuilding missing features, such as reconstructing missing trim on an original porch.

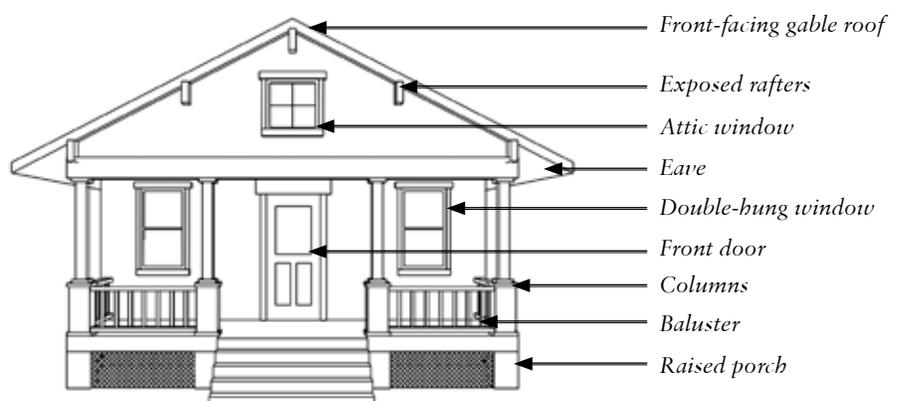
Rehabilitation

The *rehabilitation* of a structure is the process of returning it to a state that makes a contemporary use possible, while still preserving those portions or features that are essential to its historical, architectural, or cultural significance. It may include repairing some features and constructing a compatible new addition. Rehabilitation may also include a change in use.

Combining Treatments

Finally, combining treatments is common. Many times, a rehabilitation approach will be the best overall strategy because it is the broadest and most flexible of the treatments. Within that, however, may be a combination of other treatments as they relate to specific building components. For example, a deteriorated window may be restored and a missing porch may be reconstructed, while an original door is preserved.

The character-defining features of this home, identified here, should be respected when homeowners are making improvements.



Compatibility

New structures and alterations that preserve the historic character of a historic district are referred to as *compatible*. Some elements of compatible design include maintaining a sense of human scale and using materials of a familiar dimension, such as traditional lap siding. The shape and size of new construction also are among factors that influence compatibility. In reviewing a project for compatibility, the HAHC considers material, form, design, and scale; the massing, size, and scale of an alteration in comparison to the main structure; and the setback distance of new construction in a historic district, compared to existing structures.



Context Area

When considering compatibility, how large an area is to be used? The *context area* for a project, as defined by the 2015 Historic Preservation Ordinance, is the blockface and opposing blockface where the proposed activity is located. The ordinance goes on to say that context area may be defined differently if the HAHC and staff find that unusual and compelling circumstances exist or if it is described differently in design guidelines. When reviewing an application for a COA, Planning staff and the HAHC will consider whether the proposed project is compatible with contributing structures in the context area.



Contributing and Noncontributing Structure

As defined by the 2015 Historic Preservation Ordinance, a contributing structure is a “building, structure, object, or site that reinforces, or that has conditions which, if reversed, would reinforce the cultural, architectural, or historical significance of the historic district in which it is located, and that is identified as contributing upon the designation of the historic district in which it is located. The term also includes any structure that was identified as ‘potentially contributing’ in any historic district.”

A noncontributing structure, on the other hand, is a “building, structure, object or site that does not reinforce the cultural, architectural, or historical significance of the historic district in which it is located, and is identified as noncontributing upon the designation of the historic district in which it is located.” New buildings are noncontributing even if they are similar to existing houses.



The context area, as defined by the 2015 Historic Preservation Ordinance, for the property shown in red is outlined by the blue box.

Certificate of Appropriateness

A Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) is a “current and valid permit issued by the HAHC or the director, as applicable, authorizing the issuance of a building permit for construction, alteration, rehabilitation, restoration, relocation, or demolition required by this article.”



Preserving the historic significance and integrity of the historic districts is an essential policy embedded in the Historic Preservation Ordinance.

Many of the upcoming design guidelines will build upon the principles described previously, in that they will be directed toward preserving the integrity of historic structures and the historic districts as a whole. The design guidelines will also accommodate change and active uses, while preserving key character-defining features that contribute to the overall integrity of a structure and its significance as a cultural resource. Finally, the design guidelines will address how new construction can be compatible within the historic districts.

WHY PRESERVE HISTORIC STRUCTURES?

The historic districts are essential components of the city's identity. They enhance quality of life, economic vitality, and environmental sustainability. Investment in these assets ensures that the social, cultural, and economic attraction of the city is maintained and enhanced.

Livability and Quality of Life

The distinct character of each historic district contributes to the city's quality of life. When numerous historic structures are located on a block, they create a street scene that is pedestrian-friendly, which encourages walking and neighborly interaction. Decorative stylistic exteriors also contribute to a sense of identity that is distinct from newer and redeveloped areas of the city. This sense of place reinforces desirable community social patterns and contributes to a sense of security and community pride, making historic neighborhoods desirable places to live and work.

Economic Benefits

The economic benefits of investing in historic structures and preserving historic districts is well-documented through numerous state and nationwide studies, such as *Economic Impact of Historic Preservation in Texas*, updated in 2015. Because historic structures are finite and cannot be replaced, they can be precious commodities, especially in historic districts. Preservation, therefore, can add value to property.

Rehabilitation projects generally are more labor intensive, with up to 70% of the total project budget being spent on labor, compared to 50% for new construction. This means that more of the money invested in the project will stay in the local economy, rather than be used for materials sourced outside the community.

Many cities benefit from the economic effects of heritage tourism, which the National Trust for Historic Preservation defines as “people traveling to experience the places, artifacts, and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past.” According to the 2015 University of Texas and Rutgers University Economic Impact of Historic Preservation in Texas report, heritage tourism is a \$7.3 billion dollar industry in Texas and accounts for more than 10.5 percent of all travel in Texas. Studies show that heritage travelers stay longer, and spend more money, than other tourists, and this economic activity helps to create and sustain jobs in travel, retail, restaurant, and service businesses.



Promoting heritage tourism is an important part of the City of Houston’s adopted Arts and Cultural Plan, which identifies heritage as a component of culture. It says, “Culture” is most often defined in anthropological terms. It is a broad definition of culture, and is defined as any form of human expression. Culture is also defined as traditions, historical resources, community heritage, and practices and forms of expression that are valued, practiced, and preserved by a community. The Plan specifically recommends that, among other things, the City should:

- Leverage Houston’s “world city” image, international arts venues and diverse cultural offerings in destination marketing with the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau and other partners, and
- Develop a program of neighborhood-based cultural tourism with the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau and other partners.

Neighborhood-based cultural tourism is most likely to occur in historic districts, where the authentic architecture and character of the neighborhood has been preserved. Historic areas inherently provide a strong foundation for the arts and other cultural activities. The City of Houston’s historic preservation program, therefore, directly supports these tourism objectives.

Environmental Sustainability

Sustainable development and the conservation of historic resources are central principles of historic preservation. Sensitive stewardship of historic building stock reduces environmental impact, and thus, preserving and adapting a historic building is sound environmental policy. Re-using a building preserves the energy and resources invested in its construction, keeps materials out of landfills, and reduces the need to produce new construction materials.

Preserving a historic building retains *embodied energy*, which is the amount of energy expended to create the original building and its components. Studies confirm that the loss of embodied energy associated with the replacement of an existing building would take three decades or more to recoup from the reduced operating energy costs in a new building. If a historic building is demolished, the embodied energy is lost and significant amounts of new energy are required to replace it.

In addition, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, building debris constitutes around a third of all waste generated in the United States. This can be reduced significantly if historic structures are retained, rather than demolished.

Furthermore, historic buildings can save energy, although some people may intuitively think otherwise. The most cost-effective energy savings are not usually achieved by replacing original building fabric with contemporary alternatives, but by the repair, weatherstripping, and insulation of original elements. For instance, properly caulking windows and doors, as well as adding insulation to attic spaces of historic buildings will save energy at a higher rate than replacing single-pane windows. Also, materials used to build historic houses (such as old-growth lumber) are more durable than materials available today. A 100-year-old window is made of stronger wood than a new wood window, and vinyl is a plastic, petroleum-based product and not as recyclable as wood.